

Friendly Fire : 1855-Style

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The following distressing item appeared in the '*Illustrated London News*' for 7 April 1855:-

'War Department, April 3.

Lord Panmure has this day received a despatch and its enclosure, of which the following are copies, addressed to his Lordship, by Field-Marshal the Lord Raglan, G.C.B.

Before Sebastopol, March 20, 1855.

My Lord, — It is with deep concern that I transmit for your Lordship's information the copy of a letter, which I received on the 18th instant, from General Canrobert, announcing, with every expression of concern, the death of a British officer, who appears to have wandered into the French camp, and, not answering the challenge that was repeated three times, was shot dead by the French sentry, whose post he had approached. This officer, Surgeon Le Blanc, of the 9th Foot, occupied a tent near the hospital huts of his regiment, situated at some distance from the encampment of the regiment itself. He was a gentleman of most temperate habits, and was occupied in reading, when, suddenly, upon the alarm sounding, he rose from his seat, leaving his candle lighted and his book open, and walked out; he was never seen alive afterwards. It should be explained that, shortly after the close of the day on the 17th, there was a very heavy fire on the left of the French right, which was maintained for several hours. None of the English posts were attacked, but it was considered prudent to get the greater portion of our troops under arms. M. Le Blanc was shortsighted, and probably mistook his way from the first, the night being excessively dark, for he was found far distant to the left, and must have wandered from our position without knowing the direction in which he was going. Being anxious to ascertain the facts of this unfortunate case as correctly as possible, I have set on foot an inquiry, to be conducted by English and French officers, in association with each other, and I propose to do myself the honour to send you their report. I have addressed a similar letter to the General Commanding-in-Chief.

I have, &c,
Raglan.

[Inclosure.]

Head-quarters, March 18th, 1855.

My Lord, - I am grieved to have to inform you of an event, much to be regretted, which painfully engrosses the French army and its Commander-in-Chief. Last night, whilst the troops were kept perpetually on the alert, an English officer presented himself before the line of the 18th Regiment, established near the Watch-tower behind our trenches of the left attack. Although summoned three times by the *qui vive*, the officer did not reply; the sentinel fired, and he was killed on the spot.

I can hardly understand how this unhappy officer found himself at such an hour so far from the English Camp. I believe that his death can only be attributed to his own imprudence; but I do not the less deplore this event, which must also be attributed to the natural emotion of a young soldier, who in the midst of the events which marked last night, rigorously executed the military regulation.

I have, &c,
General Canrobert,
Field-Marshal Lord Raglan, &c., &c.'

From '*Hart's List*' for 1853 (pp 31 and 313), I see that Surgeon Le Blanc was appointed Assistant Surgeon on 24 May 1841 and Surgeon 2nd Class on 27 February, 1852, stationed in Jamaica. He served with a detachment of the 38th Regiment in co-operation with a Naval

expedition under Capt. Lock in the ascent, in boats, of the river St. Juan de Nicaragua, Central America, in 1848, including the assault and capture of the port of Serapiqui, and surrender of the Forts of Castello Viejo and St. Carlos. 'Hart's List' for 1855 (p 386) records his death on the 17th March aged 39 - John Shepherd's book '*Crimean Doctors: A History of the British Medical Services in the Crimean War. Vol. 2*' (Liverpool University Press, 1991) records on p. 328 that 'Staff-Surgeon Edward Le Blanc, surgeon to the 9th Regiment, was accidentally killed on 17th March. Le Blanc was short-sighted and rather deaf. A night alarm had been raised and when he left his tent to investigate he strayed into an adjacent French camp. Challenged by a sentry, he failed to reply and was shot through the head. Raglan convened a Board to investigate the affair and no blame was attached to the sentry.

Such things, as we know all too well from recent reports, will happen in war and we can only regret that an experienced surgeon was needlessly shot down by one of his allies. Deafness may not have been a barrier in the exercise of his profession but I am concerned that he was so confused and short-sighted as to wander to his death in the darkness. Casting no slight on his memory, those are surely not the best attributes of a surgeon

I suspect that the sentry was commended for correct action and good shooting...